The Episode of the Bertillon Method

The Schemes of Colonel Clay

BY GRANT ALLEN.

We had a terrible passage home from New York. The captain told us he "knew every drop of water in the Atlantic personally;" and he had never seen them so uniformly obstreperous. The ship rolled in the trough; Charles rolled in his cabin, and would not be comforted. As we approached the Irish coast, I scrambled up on deck in a violent gale and retired again somewhat precipitately to announce to my brother-in-law that we had come in sight of the Fastnet Rock lighthouse. Charles merely turned over in his berth and moaned.

"I don't believe it," he answered. "I expect it is probably Colonel Clay in another of his manifold disguises!"

At Liverpool, however, the Adelphi consoled him. We dined luxuriously in the Louis Quinze restaurant, as only millionaires can dine, and proceeded next day by Pullman car to London. We found Amelia dissolved in tears at a domestic cataclysm. It seemed that Cesarine had given notice.

Charles was scarcely home again when he began to bethink him of the least among his investments. Like many other wealthy men, my respected connection is troubled more or less, in the background of his consciousness, by a pervading dread that he will die a beggar. To guard against this misfortune—which I am bound to admit nobody else fears for him—he invested several years ago a sum of two hundred thousand pounds in consols, to serve as a nest egg in case of the collapse of Golcondas and South Africa generally. It is part of the same amiable mania, too, that he will not allow the dividend warrants on this sum to be sent to him by post, but insists, after the fashion of old ladies and country parsons, upon calling personally at the Bank of England four times a year to claim his interest. He is well known by sight to not a few of the clerks, and his appearance in Threadneedle street is looked forward to with great regularity within a few weeks of each lawful quarter day.

So, on the morning after our arrival in town, Charles observed to me, cheerfully:

"Sey, I must run into the city today to claim my dividends. There are two quarters owing.

I accompanied him into the bank. Even that mighty official, the beadle at the door, unfastened the handle of the millionaire's carriage. The clerk who received us smiled and nodded.

"How much?" he asked after the stereotyped fashion.

"Two hundred thousand," Charles answered, looking affable.

The clerk turned up the book.

"Paid!" he said, with decision. "What's your game, sir, if I may ask you?"

"Paid!" Charles echoed, drawing back.

The clerk gazed across at him.

"Yes, Sir Charles," he answered, in a somewhat severe tone. "You must remember you drew a quarter's dividend from myself—last week—at this very counter."

Charles stared at him fixedly.

"Show me the signature," he said at last, in a slow, dazed fashion. I suspected mischief.

The clerk pushed the book across to him. Charles examined the name close.

"Colonel Clay again!" he cried, turning to me with a despondent air. "He must have dressed the part. I shall die in the workhouse, Sey! That man has stolen away even my nest egg from me."

I saw it at a glance.

"Mrs. Quackenboss!" I put in. "Those portraits on the Etruria! It was to help him in his make-up! You recollect, she sketched your face and figure at all possible angles."

"And last quarter's?" Charles inquired, staggering.

The clerk turned up the entry.

"Drawn on the tenth of July," he answered, carelessly, as if it mattered nothing.

Then I knew why the Colonel had run across to England.

Charles positively reeled.

"Take me home, Sey," he cried. "I am ruined, ruined! He will leave me with not half a million in the world. My poor, poor boys will beg their bread, unheeded, through the streets of London!"

((As Amelia has landed estate settled upon her worth 150,000 pounds, this last contingency affected me less to tears than Charles seemed to think necessary.)

We made all needful inquiries and put the police upon the quest at once, as always. But no redress was forthcoming. The money, once paid, could not be recovered. It is a playful little privilege of consols that the government declines under any circumstances to pay twice over. Charles drove back to Mayfair a crushed and broken man. I think if Colonel Clay himself could have seen him just then he would have pitied that vast intellect in its grief and bewilderment.

After lunch, however, my brother-in-law's natural buoyancy reasserted itself by degrees. He rallied a little.

"Seymour," he said to me, "you've heard, of course, of the Bertillon system of measuring and registering criminals."

"I have," I answered. "And it's excellent as far as it goes. But, like Mrs. Glasse's jugged hare, it all depends upon the initial step. 'First catch your criminal.' Now, we have never caught Colonel Clay—"

"Oh, rather," Charles interposed unkindly, "when you did catch him you didn't hold him."

I ignored the unkindly suggestion, and continued in the same voice:

"We have never secured Colonel Clay, and until we secure him we cannot register him by the Bertillon method. Besides, even if we had once caught him and duly noted the shape of his nose, his chin, his ears, his forehead, of what use would that be against a man who turns up with a fresh face each time, and can mold his features into what form he likes, to deceive and foil us?"

"Never mind, Sey," my brother-in-law said. "I was told in New York that Dr. Frank Beddersley of London was the best exponent of the Bertillon system now living in England; and to Beddersley I shall go. Or, rather, I'll invite him here to lunch tomorrow."

"Who told you of him?" I inquired. "Not Dr. Quackenboss, I hope; nor yet Mr. Algernon Coleyard?"

Charles paused and reflected.

"No, neither of them," he answered, after a short internal deliberation. "It was that magazine editor chap we met at Wrengold's."

"He's all right," I said; "or, at least, I think so."

So we wrote a polite invitation to Dr. Beddersley, who pursued the method professionally, asking him to come and lunch with us at Mayfair at 2 next day.

Dr. Beddersley came—a dapper little man, with penthouse eyebrows, and keen, small eyes, whom I suspected at sight of being Colonel Clay himself in another of his clever polymorphic embodiments. He was clear and concise. His manner was scientific. He told us at once that though the Bertillon method was of little use till the expert had seen the criminal once, yet if we had consulted him earlier he might probably have saved us some serious disasters.

"A man so ingenious as this," he said, "would no doubt have studied Bertillon's principles himself, and would take every possible means to prevent recognition by them. Therefore you might almost disregard the nose, the chin, the mustache, the hair, all of which are capable of such easy alteration. But there remain some features which are more likely to persist—height, shape of neck, build and fingers; the timbre of the voice, the color of the iris. Even these, again, may be partially disguised or concealed; the way the hair is dressed, the amount of padding, a high collar round the throat, a dark line about the eyelashes, may do more to alter the appearance of a face than you could readily credit."

"So we know," I answered.

"The voice, again," Dr. Beddersley continued. "The voice itself may be most fallacious. The man is no doubt a clever mimic. He could, perhaps, compress or enlarge his larynx. And I judge from what you tell me that he took characters each time which compelled him largely to alter and modify his tone and accent."

"Yes," I said. "As the Mexican Seer, he had, of course, a Spanish intonation. As the little curate, he was a cultivated North countryman. As David Granton he spoke gentlemanly Scotch. As Von Lebenstein, naturally, he was a South German, trying to express himself in French. As Professor Schleiermacher he was a North German speaking broken English. As Elihu Quackenboss he had a fine and pronounced Kentucky flavor. And as the poet he drawled after the fashion of the clubs, with lingering remnants of a Devonshire ancestry."

"Quite so," Dr. Beddersley answered. "That is just what I should expect. Now, the question is, do you know him to be one man, or is he really a gang? Is he a name for a syndicate? Have you any photographs of Colonel Clay himself in any of his disguises?"

"Not one," Charles answered. "He produced some himself when he was Medhurst, the detective. But he pocketed them at once, and we never recovered them."

"Could you get any?" the doctor asked. "Did you note the name and address of the photographer?"

"Unfortunately, no," Charles replied. "But the police at Nice showed us two. Perhaps we might borrow them."

"Until we get them," Dr. Beddersley said, "I don't know that we can do anything. But if you can once give me two distinct photographs of the real man, no matter how much disguised, I could tell you whether they were taken from one person; and, if so, I think I could point out certain details in common which might aid us to go upon."

All this was at lunch. Amelia's niece, Dolly Lingfield, was there, as it happened; and I chanced to note a most guilty look stealing over her face all the while we were talking. Suspicious as I had learned to become by this time, however, I did not suspect Dolly of being in league with Colonel Clay; but I confess I wondered what her blush could indicate. After lunch, to my surprise, Dolly called me away from the rest into the library.

"Uncle Seymour," she said to me—the dear child calls me Uncle Seymour, though, of course, I am not in any way related to her—"I have some photographs of Colonel Clay, if you want them."

"You!" I cried, astonished. "Why, Dolly, how did you get them?"

For a minute or two she showed some little hesitation in telling me. At last she whispered:

"You won't get angry if I confess?" (Dolly is just 19, and remarkably pretty.)

"And you won't tell Aunt Amelia or Aunt Isabel?" she inquired somewhat anxiously.

"Not for worlds," I answered. (As a matter of fact, Amelia and Isabel are the last people in the world to whom I should dream of confiding anything that Dolly might tell me).

"Well, I was stopping at Seldon, you know, when Mr. David Granton was there," Dolly went on; "or, rather, when that scamp pretended he was David Granton; and—and—you won't be angry with me, will you?—one day I took a snapshot with my kodak at him and Aunt Amelia."

"Why, what harm was there in that?" I asked, bewildered. The wildest stretch of fancy could hardly conceive that the Hon. David had been flirting with Amelia.

Dolly colored still more deeply.

"Oh, you know Bertie Winslow?" she said. "Well, he's interested in photography—and—and also in me. And he's invented a process, which isn't of the slightest practical use, he says; but its peculiarity is that it reveals textures. At least, that's what Bertie calls it. It makes things come out so. And he gave me some plates of his own for my kodak—half a dozen or more, and—I took Aunt Amelia with them."

"Oh, Uncle Seymour," Dolly cried. "How kind you men are! If Aunt Amelia knew she would never forgive me. Why, you must understand. The—the rouge, you know, and the pearl powder!"

"Oh, it comes out, then in the photograph?" I inquired.

"Comes out! I should think so! It's like little black spots all over Amelia's face. Such a guy as she looks in it!"

"And Colonel Clay is in them, too?"

"Yes; I took them when he and Auntie were talking together, without either of them noticing. And Bertie developed them. I've three of David Granton. Three beauties; most successful."

"Any other character?" I asked, seeing business ahead.

Dolly hung back still redder.

"Well, the rest are with Aunt Isabel," she answered, after a struggle.

"My dear child," I replied, hiding my feelings as a husband, "I will be brave. I will bear up even against that last misfortune!"

Dolly looked up at me pleadingly.

"It was here in London," she went on; "when I was last with Auntie. Medhurst was stopping in the house at the time; and I took him twice, tete-a-tete with Aunt Isabel!"

"Isabel does not paint," I murmured, stoutly.

Dolly hung back again.

"No, but—her hair!" she suggested, in a faint voice.

"Its color," I admitted, "is in places assisted by a—well, you know, a restorer."

Dolly broke into a mischievous, sly smile.

"Yes, it is," she continued. "And, oh, Uncle Sey, where the restorer has—er—restored it, you know, it comes out in the photograph with a sort of brilliant, iridescent, metallic sheen on it!"

"Bring them down, my dear," I said, gently, patting her head with my hand. In the interests of justice I thought it best not to frighten her.

Dolly brought them down. They seemed to me poor things, yet well worth trying. We found it pissible, on further confabulation, by the simple aid of a pair of scissors, so to cut each in two that all trace of Amelia and Isabel was obliterated. Even so, however, I judged it best to call Charles and Dr. Beddersley to a private consultation in the library with Dolly, and not to submit the mutilated photographs to public inspection by their joint subjects. Here, in fact, we had five patchy portraits of the redoubtable colonel, taken at various angles, and in characteristic, unstudied poses. A child had outwitted the cleverest sharper in Europe.

The moment Beddersley's eye fell upon them a curious look came over his face.

"Why, these," he said, "are taken on Herbert Winslow's method, Miss Lingfield."

"Yes," Dolly admitted timidly; "they are. He's—a friend of mine, don't you know, and—he gave me some plates that just fitted my camera."

Beddersley gazed at them steadily. Then he turned to Charles. "And this young lady," he said, "has quite unintentionally and unconsciously succeeded in tracking Colonel Clay to earth at last. They are genuine photographs of the man—as he is—without the disguises!"

"They look to me most blotchy," Charles murmured. "Great black lines down the nose, and such spots on the cheek, too!"

"Exactly," Beddersley put in. "Those are differences in texture. They show just how much of the man's face is human flesh—"

"And how much wax," I ventured.

"Not wax," the expert answered, gazing close. "This is some harder mixture. I should guess a composition of guttapercha and India rubber, which takes color well, and hardens when applied, so as to lie quite evenly, and resists heat or melting. Look here; that's an artificial scar, filling up a real hollow, and this is an added bit to the tip of the nose, and those are shadows, due to inserted cheekpieces, within the mouth, to make the man look fatter!"

"Why, of course," Charles cried. "India rubber it must be. That's why in France they call him le Colonel Caoutchouc!"

"Can you reconstruct the real face from them?" I inquired auxiously.

"Give me an hour or two," he said, "and a box of water colors. I think by that time—putting two and two together—I can eliminate the false and build up for you a tolerably correct idea of what the actual man himself looks like."

We turned him into the library for a couple of hours, with the materials he needed, and by tea he had completed his first rough sketch of the elements common to the two faces. He brought it out to us in the drawing room. I glanced at it first. It was a curious countenance, slightly wanting in definiteness, and not unlike those "composite photographs" which Mr. Galton produces by exposing two negatives on the same sensitized paper for ten seconds or so consecutively. Yet it struck me at once as containing something of Colonel Clay in every one of his many representatians. The little curate, in real life, did not recall the seer; nor did Elihu Quackenboss suggest Count von Leberstein or Professor Schleiermacher. Yet in this compound face, produced only from photographs of David Granton and Medhurst, I could distinctly trace a certain underlying likeness to every one of the forms which the imposter had assumed for us. In other words, though he could make up so as to mask the likeness to his other characters, he could not make up so as to mask the likeness of his own personality. He could not wholly get rid of his native build and his genuine features.

Besides these striking suggestions of the seer and the curate, however, I felt vaguely conscious of having seen and observed the man himself whom the water color represented, at some time, somewhere. It was not at Nice, it was not at Seldon; it was not at Meran; it was not in America. I believed I had been in a room with him somewhere in London.

Charles was looking over my shoulder. He gave a sudden little start.

"Why, I know that fellow!" he cried. "You recollect him Sey; he's Finglemore's brother—the chap that didn't go out to China!"

Then I recollected at once where it was that I had seen him—at the brother's in the city, before we sailed to America.

"What Christian name?" I asked.

Charles reflected a moment.

"The same as the one in the note we got with the dust coat," he answered at last. "The man is Paul Finglemore!"

"You will arrest him?" I asked.

"Can I, on this evidence?"

"We might bring it home to him."

Charles mused for a moment.

"We shall have nothing against him," he said slowly, except in so far as we can swear to his identity. And that may be difficult."

Just at that moment the footman brought in tea. Charles wondered apparently whether the man, who had been with us at Seldon when Colonel Clay was David Granton, would recollect the face or recognize having seen it.

"Look here, Dudley," he said, holding up the water color, "do you know that person?"

Dudley gazed at it a moment.

"Certainly sir," he answered briskly.

"Who is it?" Amelia asked. We expected him to answer "Count von Lebenstein," or "Mr. Granton," or "Medhurst."

Instead of that he replied, to our utter surprise:

"That's Cesarine's young man, my lady."

"Cesarine's young man?" Amelia repeated, taken aback. "Oh, Dudley, surely you must be mistaken!"

"No, my lady." Dudley replied, in a tone of conviction. "He comes to see her quite reg'lar; he have come to see her, off and on, from time to time, ever since I've been in Sir Charles' service.

"When will he be coming again?" Charles asked, breathlessly.

"He's down stairs now, sir," Dudley answered, unaware of the bombshell he was flinging into the midst of a respectable family.

Charles rose excitedly and put his back against the door.

"Secure that man," he said to me sharply, pointing with his finger.

"What man?" I asked amazed. "Colonel Clay? The young man who's down stairs now with Cesarine?"

"No," Charles answered with decision. "Dudley!"

I laid my hand on the footman's shoulder, not understanding what Charles meant. Dudley, terrified, drew back, and would have rushed from the room, but Charles, with his back against the door, prevented him.

"I—I've done nothing to be arrested, Sir Charles," Dudley cried, in abject terror, looking appealingly at Amelia. "It—it wasn't me as cheated you, and he certainly didn't look it.

"I daresay not," Charles answered. "But you don't leave this room till Colonel Clay is in custody. No, Amelia, no; it's no use your speaking to me. What he says is true. I see it all now. This villain and Cesarine have long been accomplices. The man's down stairs with her now. If we let Dudley

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